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# Developing intercultural communication skills through intergroup interaction

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The call to internationalise the curriculum has become firmly enshrined in Australian educational discourse and university mission statements. Yet, scholars in this area agree that there are few concrete examples of how educators actually set about internationalising the curriculum in a tangible and easily replicable way. This paper adopts a definition of internationalisation of the curriculum which takes into account the experiential aspects of the process of becoming an intercultural communicator. The goal of internationalising the curriculum responds to the recognition that students need to develop a degree of intercultural competence in order to function efficiently in an increasingly globalised environment. Both international and local students need to be partners in this process, and the cultural diversity of contemporary universities in the west is an ideal setting to foster the ability to mediate across cultures. In this paper, we explore some practical ways in which key issues in intercultural communication can be implemented into university curricula through programmes that promote interaction across groups.

La llamada a internacionalizar el currículo se encuentra firmemente afianzada en el discurso académico y en las declaraciones de las universidades australianas. Sin embargo, estudios en esta área convienen que hay pocos ejemplos concretos que indiquen cómo los educadores pueden internacionalizar el currículo de una manera tangible y fácilmente replicable. Este artículo adopta una definición de la internacionalización del currículo que considera los aspectos experienciales en el desarrollo del proceso de comunicación intercultural. La meta de internacionalizar el currículo responde al reconocimiento de que los estudiantes necesitan desarrollar un grado de capacidad intercultural para desempeñarse eficientemente en un ambiente cada vez más global. Tanto los estudiantes internacionales como los locales necesitan colaborar en este proceso. La diversidad cultural que caracteriza a las universidades contemporáneas en occidente hace de éstas un ámbito ideal para fomentar la capacidad de mediar entre culturas. En este artículo exploramos algunos

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programas prácticos que pueden ser implementados en currículos universitarios para promover la interacción entre grupos.

## Introduction

In Australia, as in other parts of the world where foreign students increasingly supplement the income of universities, 'internationalising the curriculum' is now firmly ensconced in educational discourse and in the consciousness of educators and higher education policy makers alike. Yet, the call to internationalise the curriculum has many different interpretations, and tertiary institutions have adopted diverse generic approaches to accomplish this aim. Despite the centrality that international education has assumed in academic policy statements, scholars in this area agree that there are few concrete models of how educators actually set about internationalising the curriculum in a tangible and easily replicable way (Eisenchlas & Trevaskes, 2003a; Bell, 2004). The means to internationalise 'may still be unclear, partly because internationalising the curriculum is a construct, not a clearly defined set of ideals or best practice' (Bell, 2004).

Most direct attempts to internationalise the curriculum have focussed on introducing into individual courses examples from international practice in the relevant disciplines, either through the examination of case studies or through the use of scenarios said to reflect situations students may encounter in dealing across cultures (Yershova *et al.*, 2000). These practices, valuable as they are, can only be taken as a 'first step' in the acquisition of the competences and skills needed to become effective intercultural communicators, as they do little to promote understanding and give local students experience in authentic intercultural interactions.

Underlying the call for internationalising the curriculum is the conviction, expressed in university mission statements across Australia, that the development of intercultural competence is a key goal of internationalisation and that all students, that is, local and international, need to obtain at least a minimal level of intercultural competence in order to operate effectively in an increasingly ethnically and culturally diverse society and globalised economy. Still, there is little reflection on what intercultural competence entails, and on how intercultural learning can be fostered at university level. Rather, intercultural learning is often taken for granted as 'an automatic outcome and benefit of intercultural contact' (Leask, 2005).

A number of studies, however, have cast doubts on the degree of intercultural contact in Australian universities. It would be expected that the proliferation of international students in Australian campuses would help in the process of developing an understanding of, and tolerance for, other cultural practices and enhance intercultural communication skills. However, surveys indicate that there is little interaction and high levels of disinterest between local and international students (The University of Western Australia, 1999; Eisenchlas & Trevaskes, 2003b).

The aim of this paper is to review and discuss four educational programmes and activities that we developed, which can be used to illustrate concrete models of internationalisation. Common to these programmes is the attempt to foster

interaction between local and international students, thus creating an environment in which authentic intercultural communication can be developed in an experiential way.

Although each of the programmes to be discussed has been designed to address particular communicative contexts, they do share the aim of promoting interactions between groups as an effective way of developing intercultural competence, and a common view of culture. Before describing the programmes, then, it is useful to briefly reflect on these common elements.

### **Promoting intergroup interaction**

As noted above, there is increasing recognition that both local and international students need to become competent intercultural communicators, but each group faces particular challenges. In the case of the international students, some impediments are language-related, while others are related to their educational, cultural and social adaptation to campus life in Australia. It is now acknowledged in the literature that the lack of social integration of international students is a source of their dissatisfaction (Herman, 2004). A report on this problem by Smart *et al.* (cited in Herman, 2004) suggests an image of ‘two parallel streams of students’ proceeding through university—the Australian and the international—within close proximity but, in the majority of cases, with little or only superficial contact and interaction. A variety of exit and other surveys confirms this fairly common experience and records repeated expressions of disappointed expectations by international students who had hope to meet and form close friendships with Australian students, visit Australian homes and experience local culture firsthand.

The existence of the two ‘parallel streams’ works to the detriment of the local students as well, since valuable opportunities to engage in meaningful cross-cultural communication are missed. Moreover, the lack of social engagement between international and local students hinders in-class interaction, creates resentment and reinforces stereotypical views: local students feel—and at times openly express the idea—that international students contribute nothing to classroom discussions and debates, while international students feel their opinions are not valued by their Australian classmates.

Rather than creating separate programmes to address issues specific to either local or international students, we argue that the most effective programmes of internationalising the curriculum are those which require group work and cooperation between the two groups and, in terms of teaching content, programmes that explicitly address the very intellectual, social and cultural challenges and concerns that international and local students face at university. The maxim ‘Tell me and I will listen; show me and I will understand; engage me and I will learn’ is of particular relevance here, as it is only through the practice of intergroup communication that students can become competent communicators and develop the skills and attitudes to complement the theories they are exposed to in intercultural communication classes.

### **Culture as the experience of everyday life**

In contrast with most intercultural communication textbooks, that discuss ‘culture’ in the context of national boundaries, we believe that an effective launching pad to an appreciation of intercultural and intergroup interaction is for students to learn to identify and understand the nature of culture as the experience of everyday living which involves ‘both something you perform and something you learn about’ (Kramsch, 1991, p. 228). Central to this approach is a challenge to monolithic interpretations of culture in favour of a view that focuses on the changing, contextual and heterogeneous nature of this construct. Thus, we share the view that culture is not ‘something prone, waiting to be discovered but an active meaning-making system of experiences which enters into and is constructed within every act of communication’ (Barro *et al.*, 1998, p. 83). Furthermore, cultural norms are internalised, and, as such, seem ‘invisible’ to our awareness. In order to become explicit, these taken for granted norms need to be questioned, a process that Barro *et al.* (1998, p. 83) describe as ‘making the familiar strange’.

Within this definitional context, ‘cultural competence can be best developed in a structured learning environment, where conscious parallels can be drawn, where language can be explicitly linked to its meaning in a particular sociocultural and historical context, where disparate linguistic or cultural phenomena can be brought together and appended to more abstract principles of both base (C1) and target (C2) language and culture’ (Kramsch, 1991, p. 229).

The first crucial step in acquiring intercultural competence, defined as ‘the ability to mediate between one’s own culture and that of others’ (Buttjes, 1989 cited in Dlaska, 2000, p. 112) involves developing the ability to reflect upon one’s own cultural norms and values, and on how these shape social identities of individuals and groups. We suggest that programmes should be designed in a way that embodies this ethos of interculturality, so that they reflect the communicative agenda of internationalisation as a process through which individuals or groups learn better to communicate their aspirations, values and attitudes in intergroup situations, and to appreciate those of others.

### **Internationalising students’ experiences: four case studies**

In line with our view of culture as a dynamic construct, and of intercultural communication as a process of negotiation across individuals and groups, we argue that the process of internationalising students’ experiences, by its very nature, can only occur in specific ‘instances’ of interaction between individuals and/or groups within the very context of their own curriculum content and assessment practices. In this sense, internationalisation of the curriculum, like the concept of culture itself, is contextual. It takes on different meanings and significance in different contexts.

Within the student-centred pedagogy that we follow in our courses, optimising student learning outcomes involves preparing students for intercultural engagement in their immediate social environment and community and in their future professional

fields. With this idea in mind, we have developed a number of programmes and activities that rely on a definition of internationalisation that is essentially viewed as a process of communication and interculturality. The accent is placed strongly on enhancing opportunities for interaction and exchange of ideas between individuals and groups of diverse cultural backgrounds, and on providing greater opportunities for students to be exposed to interactions that focus on intercultural content. In what follows, we describe these programmes that are located in three settings, starting in the more controlled classroom environment, moving through the university setting, and extending into the wider community.

*Case Study 1. Using the experiences of local and international students as a classroom teaching resource*

The first case study focuses on two 40-minute films produced for a second year course, 'Intercultural Communication: theory and practice', which we team-teach in the context of a BA in Applied Linguistics and Languages. The culturally heterogeneous group of students we teach in our course is characterised by diversity in terms of skills (both linguistic and academic), interests and cultural background. Given that this sort of class composition is becoming the norm rather than the exception, as Intercultural Communication (IC) educators, we have taken up the challenge to turn this heterogeneity into one of the key advantages of the course; to use this diverse community as a resource for teaching and learning. In this course, as discussed above, culture is conceptualised as the experience of everyday living. Intercultural interactions are placed in specific contexts so that students recognise the conscious and unconscious acting out of cultural mores as situational and not necessarily universal. The activities we employ to reflect this orientation inquire into ways in which international students interact in the culturally unfamiliar environment of the Australian university system and how local Australian students, on overseas language exchanges, interact in a socially and culturally unfamiliar environment.

The films, titled 'Dreams, Illusions and Other Realities' and 'From Australia to the World', document the personal experiences of international and local university students respectively. 'Dreams, Illusions and Other Realities' follows the experience of six international students from Argentina, Italy, Zimbabwe, China, India and Japan who study in Australia. Similarly, in 'From Australia to the World', six Australian students who studied in Brazil, Italy, Germany, Japan, China and Argentina recall their experiences of intercultural adaptation and their perceptions of themselves as the 'other'.

Both films focus on university students' personal experiences and on the broader conceptual issues concerning the process of intercultural adaptation in Australia and overseas, cross-cultural differences, adapting to academic life in a new culture, comparative concepts of teaching and learning, and the basic competencies and skills required to successfully operate in a new cultural environment. The films address the question of how internationalisation affects students on a personal, social and institutional level by giving the audience the opportunity to hear how

other students develop skills in dealing with the pleasures and pitfalls of living in an overseas environment. The specific topics featured are: (1) Expectations and preconceptions; (2) Adjusting to a new environment; (3) Challenges and frustrations; (4) Missing the home culture; (5) Coping strategies; (6) Teaching and learning; (7) Friendships; (8) Men and women; (9) Advice to others and personal growth; and (10) Going back home.

We wrote accompanying booklets that gave instructions for integrating the topics discussed in the films into the classroom practice by reflecting on various definitions of culture. We first ask students to discuss the communicative situations that the subjects of the films describe. Then we extend the discussion to hypothesise other similar situations where they themselves might interact and ‘perform’ cultural practices, both consciously and unconsciously. Following this, classroom activities, based on the students’ viewing of the two films, are approached through scenario-building; inquiring into how people behave and react in culturally unfamiliar situations, in terms of the language they use and modes of communicating when meeting someone for the first time; the social cues one would expect to give and receive when attempting to make friends in various social sites; and coming to recognise what is negotiable in different settings, and other similar topics. We then reflect on the concept of culture and its place in communication, considering both the macro and micro levels of culture within the immediate context of students’ everyday experiences. It is at the immediate micro-level of everyday experience with, and in, culture that students best appreciate the inextricable connection between communication, language and culture.

*Case Study 2. Internationalisation and intercultural exchanges: exploring culture in everyday life in a Chinese language exchange program*

International students can face a range of confronting situations when settling into a new academic environment, including lack of opportunities to communicate with local students on a social level. Some universities have introduced mentoring programmes whereby local students guide international students through this transition phase. Yet, however useful these programmes might be, they seem limited in scope, with few obvious benefits to the local students. Rather than promote meaningful interactions between participants on an equal footing, the programmes can cast international students into a dependent role. Furthermore, the onerous task of organizing these programmes relies on the goodwill of a dedicated academic or administrator.

In this case study, we discuss a pilot project that we developed to enhance interactions between students in an informal face-to-face situation. This pilot programme, ‘Culture in everyday life’, consisted of a structured exchange between Masters degree students from China and Australian students learning Chinese. The idea of pairing local and international students is, of course, not new and has been implemented before (Montgomery & Eisenstein, 1985; Eisenchlas & Hortiguera, 1999). However, unlike most programmes that are designed to improve linguistic skills, the

focus of our programme was cultural norms and understanding. A central aspect of this project is the emphasis on discussions and reflections on everyday practices and behaviours, and importantly, on how these impinge on language use.

With the view of culture as the experiences of everyday living that we adopted, we developed a cultural exchange programme emphasising everyday cultural practices at the university setting. For international students, these are among the most relevant but often the least accessible aspect of culture. In our study, these practices became the 'common ground' between the two populations, allowing students to create a non-threatening 'cultural space' from where to explore and reflect on their own and other's cultural mores and values.

In this pilot project, students met once a week for a period of six weeks. They spoke first in Chinese and then in English. Each participant received a worksheet each week, to be used as a springboard for discussion and as a record of the interaction. The worksheet was written in both languages, presenting scenarios focused on concrete situations (such as asking for advice, meeting someone at a party, negotiating in the academic setting, and so on). The six topics were: establishing first contacts, developing friendships, expectations in academic settings, what is negotiable in academic settings, seeking help and how to deal with conflicting motivations. An example of a worksheet on the topic, 'What is negotiable in academic settings' is given in Appendix 1.

Activities were structured to stimulate reflection not only on what is typically done in a specific social situation but also on the values that underline and influence behaviours. A crucial aspect of the interactions involved students reflecting on the human variables (such as age, socioeconomic status, gender, religion) that play a significant role in modifying expected behaviours. We thus wanted to problematise the idea of 'culture as a monolithic construct' and help students become more aware of the heterogeneous nature of groups and societies in an increasingly globalised world.

In terms of skills development, the programme aimed at giving students experience in interacting with members of the target language group, and also the opportunity to reflect upon cultural conventions they usually take for granted, a first step in improving intercultural communication skills (Dlaska, 2000). Thus, the focus of the interactions was on developing interpretation rather than enculturation. The programme specifically did not want to encourage students to imitate behaviours that are deemed appropriate in the target culture(s), as is usually done in intercultural communication training courses.

In terms of cognitive factors, the programme sought to deepen students' awareness of how perceptions are formed, to develop their understanding of the principles and factors that influence communication among groups and individuals, and to increase their ability and confidence in interpreting unfamiliar environments. The presentation of 'cultural others' in most conventional Intercultural Communication textbooks tends to be superficial and homogenised, and more often than not this serves to reinforce, rather than challenge, stereotypes. Thus, intercultural contacts crucially add variability to the generalisations made about other cultures.

In terms of affective factors, the programme aimed to help international students overcome their sense of social isolation, and to benefit both local and international students by increasing their sensitivity to, and tolerance for, diverse cultural practices. Contact between groups has been shown to facilitate the reduction of prejudice, lessening stereotypical views of others (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998).

A focus group discussion conducted with the Chinese students following the conclusion of the pilot study yielded mixed results. Opinions conveyed during the discussion indicated that the cognitive skills and aims were largely met. Students expressed increased confidence in their ability to understand aspects of Australian culture through a reflection on the university system. Students who had previous experience with the intercultural communication literature seemed to benefit the most, being able to relate previous knowledge to concrete situations. This suggests that preparation activities prior to the meetings would have been instrumental in facilitating the exchanges by giving students a clearer understanding of the range of issues involved in culture and communication. Regarding the affective aims, students' opinions indicated clearly that the objectives were not met to the degree that we expected and that the interactions did little to modify entrenched attitudes. Despite the fact that students met with partners who were very interested in the interactions, most students showed little ability to avoid generalisations with regards to their partners, still viewing them as members of 'the other group' rather than as individuals. This is hardly surprising since students only met for a period of six weeks, too brief a time to get to know their partners on a more personal level. Regardless of this outcome, most students regarded the experience positively. It is expected that even the short participation in this pilot study, however, will have increased students confidence and interest in seeking interactions with members of the other group after the project ended, and will have enhanced their awareness of the many facets of culture.

### *Case Study 3. Group research essay*

We noted above that research on student interactions in Australian universities has shown high levels of disinterest between the local and international student populations. We speculated that the lack of interest might stem from the phenomenon, well documented in the studies of social categorisation and perception, that people easily recognise diversity in their own culture, but fail to notice this in other cultural or ethnic groups. Furthermore, in individual terms, people recognise the fluidity of self-identity (that is, the fact that our identity is a balancing act between a number of groupings to which we belong simultaneously), but tend to classify members of other ethnic groups in frozen, exclusive, identities (Berreby, 2005).

With this idea in mind, we developed a course assessment item in which the topics of internationalisation, enculturation and intergroup contact would be the objects of inquiry. This assessment item, a group research essay, required students to interact, share their own experiences and negotiate in order to complete it, and thus promoted cooperative learning. Cooperative learning has been found to be most

effective in promoting academic achievement and the reduction of prejudice in intergroup contact (Slavin, 1995; Harrison, 2001).

To complete this essay, students were asked to organise themselves in groups which included members of other cultural and/or linguistic backgrounds. They had to select a particular topic in the area of IC studies (for example, a specific aspect of non-verbal communication), explore the topic by examining how it operates in as many different languages or cultures as participants were in the group, and to present the group findings in a written essay. Each student was responsible for the section related to the language of their choice (either a language that the student was acquiring or his/her native language), but the group was responsible for the selection of the topic, the introduction, conclusion, overall flow of argumentation and consistency of style. In this way, students were required to exchange ideas and reflect on diverse cultural practices to which they may not otherwise be exposed, had also to combine these ideas with their own and negotiate the formal structure of the essay. This small group configuration also gave international students, who may not be confident about their linguistic abilities to participate in the bigger class environment, to make significant contributions to the discussion.

However, designing and writing the research essay was only one aspect of the project. Since this was a data-driven essay, students had to collect their own data from authentic media sources, interviews or surveys, using international and local peers as their research participants. This required further interaction with members of different ethnic or linguistic groups. Since data were collected mainly from participants of similar ages and interests, students were exposed to attitudes and opinions that go beyond the usual cultural stereotypes presented in intercultural communication textbooks. They experienced 'first-hand' the changing nature of cultural mores, even in societies usually (wrongly) categorised in intercultural communication books as static and opposed to change. Students were also struck by the realisation that many of the generalisations held in Australia about 'Asian cultures', for example, cannot be maintained, as there is great diversity in Asia, not to mention inside each culture. Equally important, students started to realise that there may be more similarities than differences across young people from different ethnic and/or cultural backgrounds, a first step to recognise how the fluidity of identity mentioned above is obtained across groups which, though ethnically diverse, share common interest of experiences, such as being young university students. The ability to recognise similarities as well as differences across groups, to use own and others' experiences as objects of inquiry and to negotiate common goals while working in diverse groups are the more relevant lessons students can get from an intercultural communication course.

#### *Case Study 4. Spanish in the community*

The last case we discuss in this paper involves an exchange programme developed for an undergraduate advanced level Spanish language course titled 'Spanish in the community'. This project was designed to enable students to develop an ability to

interact with members of the target culture(s), to enhance their cultural awareness in a way that bridges ‘the distance between text and experience, between the cognitive and palpable, between reading about and living which no amount of textual analysis can close’ (Barro *et al.*, 1998). Furthermore, in this project, language learners were required to take responsibility for their own learning and become informants and researchers or, as Barro *et al.* (1998, p. 80) propose, ‘ethnographers’, combining ‘the experience of the ethnographer in the field and a set conceptual framework for cultural analysis with the best practice from communicative and immersion language learning.’ Thus, we targeted cognitive and affective aspects, as well as cross-cultural communication skills.

While the mechanics of this programme were similar to the exchange described in Case Study 2, there are important differences. Participation in the interactions was not voluntary, as this was part of a university course. As in the previous example, each student was paired on a one-to-one basis with volunteer native speakers (either an individual or a family) with whom they met weekly for a period of eight weeks. Every effort was made to match students with community members with whom they had common interests, so that there were common grounds for the interactions and motivation to participate. Each week, students were given a topic for discussion based on aspects of the everyday life of Spanish speaking migrants in Australia and on their recollections of life in their home country. The topics were selected by the lecturer to stimulate comparisons between Australian and Hispanic cultures to reflect on the cultural differences and similarities encountered and on how these are manifested in language. These discussions would give students insights into sensitive life situations that they may not have experienced such as the migration process, being a member of a minority group, clash of cultural values across generations (that is, between the migrant generation and their children born or raised in Australia), and so on. Unlike the informal exchanges described in Case Study 2, however, students were able to focus on aspects which were of personal interest and were encouraged to find and explore their own perspective within the wider topic.

Students prepared thoroughly for these encounters. They were assigned weekly readings in Spanish (including diary entries, short stories, poems, newspaper articles) related to the topic, which were then discussed in class. Students then designed their individual surveys or questionnaires based on these readings, which were later completed after extensive discussions with the volunteers. The findings were discussed in class during the next session, and particular attention was paid to similarities and differences between Spanish-speaking countries and Australia. These de-briefing sessions were crucial in helping students avoid possible misunderstandings and to help them to see the ‘bigger picture’, based on analysis and interpretation of their intercultural discussions.

A survey conducted at the end of the semester indicated that students were very positive about this experience, which we as educators attribute to the extensive preparation and debriefing involved in the programme. Students valued the opportunity to interact with native speakers other than their instructors. They indicated that this informal environment was less judgmental than the language class.

The topics selected offered students a range of opportunities to reflect upon the conventions that operate in their own and other cultures. It enabled them to lessen their stereotypical views of others and develop tolerance towards other cultural practices. From the instructors' perspective, students' discussions in class seem to reveal a more reflexive attitude towards their own cultural background, and a deeper interest in getting to know members of the Spanish speaking communities. Interestingly, some participants experienced the initial stage of cultural adaptation, which is described by scholars as being accompanied by feelings of euphoria, excitement and satisfaction with regards to the 'new' culture (Dodd, 1995). They became extremely critical of Australian cultural norms and showed over-valuation of practices they identified as typically Hispanic.

From a cognitive perspective, responses and discussions in class indicated a deeper understanding of the diversity found in Hispanic societies and cultures, as well as co-cultures. More importantly, students were positively surprised to discover the many similarities that exist in terms of life experiences and cultural values between Australian and some Hispanic societies. This realization might result in gaining a perspective that goes beyond the exotic or folkloric facts usually shown in textbooks and instructional videos, illuminating the common human experience in its many facets, rather than focusing on the experience of 'otherness'.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has adopted a wider definition of internationalisation of the curriculum, one which takes into account the experiential aspects of the process of becoming an intercultural communicator, and seeks to enrich the experience of all students, local and international, in ways that go beyond the introduction of international content. In the discussion above, we explored some practical ways in which key issues in intercultural communication can be implemented into university curricula. Through programmes and practices that combine the imperative of developing intercultural competence and the imperative of providing opportunity for interactions between and among local and international students, we create spaces for student discussion and reflection on interculturality in the university setting. Hence, the focus is on the university's commitment to internationalise the academic international experience, both of those local students who are unable to enjoy the benefits of study abroad programmes and international fee-paying students who might normally have limited opportunities to explore issues of interculturality with local students and end up having an international rather than an intercultural experience.

If we are to accept that internationalisation is a process that impacts on the whole individual, then we need to look at cognitive and affective factors, and at the skills needed to perform successfully in an increasingly internationalised environment. In short, these programmes all aim to internationalise the curriculum by incorporating into students' university education the goal of developing intercultural competence. We hope that these models stimulate others to share their methods of internationalising the curriculum.

## Notes on contributors

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## **Appendix 1**

Scenario: X, an undergraduate student, does not agree with the mark that the lecturer has given him/her.

### 1. What?

What would an Australian student do to solve this situation?

What would a Chinese student do if s/he faced a similar situation in China?

What are the main differences?

### 2. Why?

Try to discover the reasons or values underlying the behaviour or strategies adopted by the Australian and Chinese students trying to solve the problem.

### 3. How?

What are the phrases you need to use in these situations? List as many as you can think of, in English and Chinese.

### 4. When and where?

If you encounter a similar problem in a very different situation (with your boss at work, for instance), could you use the same solutions? Why/why not?